

Review of *Trans Care* by Hil Malatino (University of Minnesota Press)

by Alex Barksdale | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT Hil Malatino's short book *Trans Care* critiques the heteronormativity of dominant theorizations of care. By taking trans lives seriously, he shows how trans care webs form the basis of trans survival. Malatino deftly weaves together the insights of trans studies and activism with care feminism to explore the archive, cultural production, healthcare, and politics. He broadens feminist and left perspectives on care and brings care from the margins into the center of trans studies. *Trans Care* is a plea for stronger, more egalitarian, and solidaristic relations of care.

KEYWORDS feminism, care, mutual aid, trans studies, social reproduction

Trans Care. By Hil Malatino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 90 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-5179-1118-8. US List: \$10

After decades of intensified social and ecological degradation, most recently spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate catastrophe, care as a locus of political imagination is center stage in both academic and public discourse. Yet, as Hil Malatino shows in his short book *Trans Care*, the way in which care is theorized, even in feminist circles, has been limited by heteronormativity. By taking trans lives seriously, *Trans Care* represents a guidebook out of these limits, offering new terrains to traverse.

Malatino brings trans care into view, showing how care functions as a fundamental part of trans survival. Trans people form networks of care, or "care webs" in the words of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, to provide everyday economic and social support. In *Trans Care*, Malatino is interested in how trans care webs are constituted. He takes a nuanced survey, highlighting the difficulties of providing and receiving care among marginalized and traumatized populations. Trans care webs are often tattered, threadbare, and unstable. Moreover, as he argues, forms of care can reproduce inequalities, particularly along lines of race and class. This book is a plea for stronger, more egalitarian, and solidaristic care webs.

The first three chapters form a theoretical framework for the book, laying out important conceptual tools. Chapter 1 introduces the project of the book and presents the stakes for thinking about care in the context of a trans-antagonistic world. Resisting the necropolitical move of mining trans death, Malatino asks us to consider what makes trans survival possible. Survival in its most mundane to its most daring is enabled by a multiplicity of relations of care. As an economically marginalized population, trans care webs are typically under-resourced and rely heavily on unpaid labor. Chapter 2 narrates the life story of the Canadian trans activist Rupert Raj to underscore how the "voluntary gender work" of trans care can be unsustainable, leading to burnout. However, Malatino pushes us to think beyond the typical discourses of burnout, critiquing the individualistic, clinical, and hierarchical models of care it presupposes. He highlights the interdependence and lack of separate care-giver and care-receiver roles in trans communities. To truly come to terms with what trans care is and how trans survival can be better supported, these practices cannot remain invisibilized and undertheorized.

Chapter 3 is the core critique of dominant theorizations of care that are unable to "do justice to the complexities of care labor trans subjects both need and undertake" (42). By decentering the heteronormative domestic and bio-reproductive domains, our focus can shift to trans spaces and relations where other forms of care occur. Moreover, following Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Malatino understands care as an emergent ethos, a process of building and maintaining relations. Much trans activism seeks to shift the ethos of institutions to create space for trans people. Beyond institutions, he highlights mutual aid as the interpersonal and networked forms of care most available to trans people, "the multivalent and necessary care hustle that structures so many of our lives" (43). In the only explicit engagement with Marxist feminism in the book, Malatino affirms the fundamental nature of care to reproducing society. As both invaluable and incalculable, he asserts that care cannot be understood within financialized notions of debt. Instead, an ethical understanding of our interdependence has the potential to serve as the basis of convivial and sustainable relations of care.

Malatino identifies the archive as a source of resilience for trans people. Yet historians and other archival researchers are presented with the question, "How to do justice to these lives?" (56). Chapter 4 offers a meditation on the ethics of care and responsibility required to narrate trans lives in the archive. In the next chapter, Malatino focuses on health care, the longest standing and well-established domain of trans solidaristic action. These networks of care are a response to trans medicine, which has been and largely continues to be "economically inaccessible, geographically dispersed, and rigorously gatekept" (61). One prominent example is trans crowdfunding for medical expenses, a common tactic in the United States, where universal health care is non-existent. Drawing on sociological literature, Malatino highlights that crowdfunding often replicates hierarchies of

deservingness alongside raced and classed inequalities. This is a key problem for organizing care: how can we prevent reproducing systems of hierarchy as we try to meet unmet needs? Moreover, as Malatino asserts, it is necessary to name the structural neglect that creates those unmet needs even as the work of mutual aid functions primarily at small scales. Malatino argues for a prefigurative understanding of care, making the plea to treat care as an obligation, where we show up continually for each other.

Trans Care is a necessary intervention into discourses and theories of care. Malatino deftly weaves together the insights of trans studies and activism with care feminism. He broadens feminist and left perspectives on care and brings care from the margins into the center of trans studies. However, as a short book—72 pages without notes—in a series for emerging ideas, it is useful to acknowledge its limitations. A reader seeking a fully elaborated theoretical framework or meticulously detailed case studies would likely be underwhelmed. Instead, *Trans Care* whets the appetite for more analyses of and politicization of care from trans perspectives. Malatino provides a solid foundation for others to further develop, flesh out, and problematize what the transing of care means. For organizers, *Trans Care* is useful as a manifesto, making clear the need to build better relations of care, both within the particularity of trans collectivities, and as a vision of a more just world. As we grapple with the social and ecological crises ahead, piecing together more resilient systems that ensure survival for all, not just the few, we need all the tools and maps we can carry.

Author Information

Alex Barksdale

Alex Barksdale is a PhD candidate in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Arizona on Tohono O'odham land. Their research explores trans do-it-yourself (DIY) and mutual aid practices, particularly around health and medicine. They situate their work within trans studies, anarchist theory, feminist science studies, and Marxist feminisms.

[View all of Alex Barksdale's articles.](#)

Alex Barksdale, "Review of *Trans Care* by Hil Malatino (University of Minnesota Press)," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.22>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).
Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/).

ISSN 2469-4053